



The Homecoming

by Elizabeth Armstrong Hall

Lido Beach, Florida

December 27, 2011, 9 a.m.

The sea turtle crawled to the water's edge and blinked. News cameras clicked. People cheered. Then she flapped her flippers like wings and disappeared into the surf. Her return to the Gulf of Mexico ended a 10,000-mile odyssey that almost killed her—but not quite.



Say cheese, Johnny!

Three Years Earlier

In 2008, a young sea turtle was floating in the Gulf of Mexico when the Gulf Stream dragged her into the Atlantic. Like a giant broom, the current swept her across the ocean and dumped her on a beach in the Netherlands.

A Dutch beach patrol found the turtle half-buried in the sand. Her eyes were shut. Mud and algae stuck to her shell. They rushed her to Henk Zwartepoorte, an expert on reptiles and amphibians at the Rotterdam Zoo.



Where am I?!

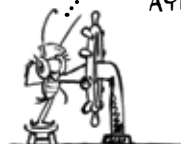
TIME TO HEAD BACK IN, MISTER STARBUG. STEER A COURSE FOR HOME.



AYE, AYE, CAPTAIN. TURN US ABOUT, SAILOR!



AYE, I SEE SEA.





system, Mr. Zwartepoorte lowered her into a tank of seawater. Then he raised the thermostat to 65°F. Ten days later, the turtle was nibbling on squid and herring. The Dutch named her “Johnny.” She was too young to show she was a girl.

Once a rescued sea turtle can survive on its own, it must be returned to its natural habitat. All sea turtles are endangered, and each of the seven species of sea turtles has its own habitat. But Johnny was so banged up that it was hard to identify her.

No Ordinary Sea Turtle

After eight months, Johnny was ready for rehab. Mr. Zwartepoorte

shipped her to Zoomarine, a marine animal rehabilitation center on the southwest coast of Portugal.

When marine biologist Dr. Elio Vicente examined his new patient, he knew she was no ordinary sea turtle. Johnny’s shell and markings matched those of a Kemp’s ridley sea turtle, the most endangered sea turtle in the world. Since most Kemp’s ridleys come from the Gulf of Mexico, Johnny was more than 3,000 miles from home.



She couldn't have survived in the sea much longer. Johnny weighed only 10 pounds, more than 50 pounds below a Kemp ridley's normal weight. She had never learned how to hunt for food or avoid ending up as someone else's food.

Working with vet nurse Antonieta Nunes, Dr. Vicente spent two years getting Johnny into shape. He put her on a daily 851-calorie diet of live herring, shrimp, and crabs.

At first Johnny lived alone in a temperature-controlled water tank. She later joined the fish and sting-rays in the main aquarium.

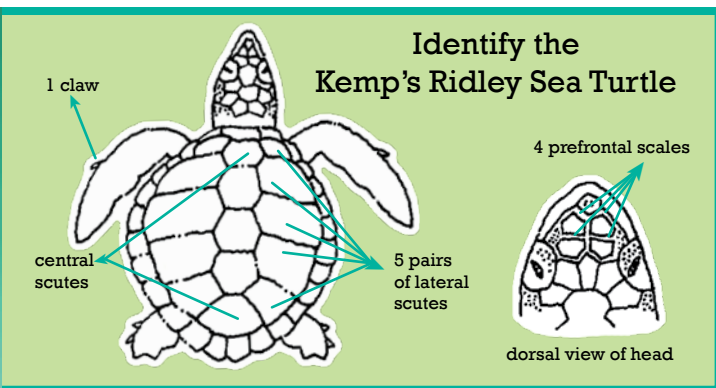
Over time, Johnny morphed into a 68-pound teenager with a hard shell and a powerful tail and flippers. Her Portuguese team called her "Johnny



Vasco da Gama," or "JV," for the 15th-century Portuguese explorer.

Dr. Vicente wanted to fly Johnny to Florida so he could release her into the Gulf of Mexico. However, she would need an export permit from Portugal and an import permit from the United States. She would also have to travel on an airline that would let a 68-pound sea turtle fly in the main cabin.

As Johnny's story leaked out, a team pulled together to bring her home. The U.S. Embassy in Lisbon handled her export permit. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)



THANK YOU, CAPTAIN SANDFLEA. YOU'RE THE BESTEST SARDINE TOUR GUIDE EVER.



YER WELCOME, LITTLE BUGGY. BUT I JUST DO THIS TOUR STUFF FER LAUGHS. ME REAL JOB IS SEAFOOD IMPORT/EXPORT, HAULING CANNED SARDINES INTO AND OUT OF THE COUNTRY.



Johnny boards a plane home.



This crate is first-class!



Mote Marine Lab scientists weigh and measure Johnny.

took care of her import permit. The Mote Marine Lab in Sarasota, Florida, coordinated her release at nearby Lido Beach.

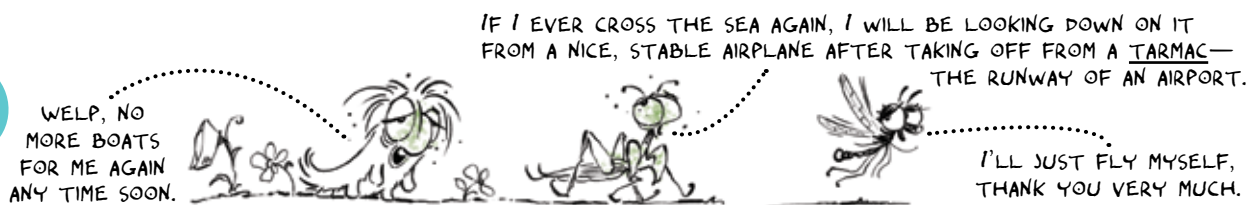
TAP Portugal Airlines offered free tickets to Miami for Johnny, Dr. Vicente, and Ms. Nunes. To make room for its “special guest,” the airline took out a row of seats in the back of the main cabin.

Welcome Home, Johnny

On November 29, 2011, Johnny boarded TAP Airline Flight #113 from Lisbon to Miami. While Dr. Vicente and Ms. Nunes monitored her heart and temperature, Johnny held court in the back of the plane. A film crew tagged along to document the turtle’s homecoming.

Johnny was the last passenger to leave the plane. Two workers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission waited on the tarmac to drive her to the Mote Marine Lab across the state.

“They pulled up in two vehicles,” recalls Sheryan Epperly, the Sea Turtle Program Leader for NOAA. Sheryan had worked for months on Johnny’s homecoming and held up a “Welcome Home” sign in English and Portuguese to greet the team.



Two days after Christmas, sea turtle fans, reporters, and camera crews gathered at Lido Beach. A little after 9 A.M., Johnny arrived in a white truck. The crowd edged closer as two Mote Marine scientists carried her across the beach and set her down at the shoreline. Johnny Vasco da Gama had finally come home. 🐢



Fabulous Facts: Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles



- Kemp's ridleys are the smallest sea turtles in the world.
- Kemp's ridleys are named after Richard M. Kemp, a Florida fisherman and naturalist who helped identify the species.
- "Ridley" comes from the word "riddle."
- Nobody knew where the females laid their eggs until the 1940s.
- Unlike other sea turtles, female Kemp's ridleys lay their eggs in daylight.



A female Kemp's ridley sea turtle digs an egg chamber in the sand where she lays approximately 100 pliable, ping-pong sized eggs.



The eggs take 50 to 70 days to hatch. A hatchling is almost black in color and only 2 inches long when it is born. The hatchling will reach maturity at about 12 years of age.

YECH! IF I EVEN SMELL THE OCEAN AGAIN I THINK I'LL BARF!



SNACK! YIPPIE!



OO LA LA! YOU POOR, POOR BUGGIES. BUT VOILA! MY YUMMY ENERGY BARS WILL MAKE YOU SHIPSHAPE.